

## CHAPTER ONE:

# THE MOON

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New craters dotted the lunar landscape. Charred debris littered the basaltic lava plains. The Earth, rising over the horizon, cast a cold blue radiance over the Sea of Serenity—and the mangled remains of the Watchtower.

Fires still blazed within the atmospheric force field protecting the smoking ruins from the vacuum outside. Torn and twisted metal reflected the raging flames. The Watchtower's exterior plating had been constructed of virtually impenetrable promethium-reinforced titanium/vanadium alloys, but that had not spared the JLA's headquarters from the explosion that had destroyed it from within. The central tower and observation deck had collapsed completely, burying the Hall of Justice and the lower levels of the hub beneath tons of smoldering rubble. Thick black fumes spread outward until they reached the limits of the force field, creating a sooty bubble above the ruins. Thin wisps of smoke began to seep out into space. The force field, it seemed, was beginning to weaken.

Superman soared above the wreckage, heedless of the Moon's feeble gravity. The lifeless vacuum and bitter cold had no effect upon his invulnerable form, although it felt strange not to have the wind blowing against his face. Momentum alone spread his bright red cape out behind him. The capital S upon his chest was known throughout the galaxy. High above the leaking force field, he gazed down at the ruins in dismay. The Watchtower was utterly demolished, possibly beyond repair. From the look of things, it appeared that the explosion had originated somewhere deep within the central hub.

Where J'onn would have been, Superman thought worriedly. He eyed the crackling flames with concern; fire affected Martians much as kryptonite affected him. What if the blaze had weakened J'onn before he could escape? The Martian Manhunter might still be trapped somewhere within the burning ruins.

His X-ray vision penetrated the wreckage, but he found no sign of his friend. Ascending higher into the lunar sky, he scanned the surrounding terrain for miles around. With telescopic vision he examined the desolate moonscape, but spied not even a microscopic trace of the missing hero. His superhearing heard nothing beyond muffled sounds of destruction from within the force field down below.

Superman hovered in midair, uncertain whether to be relieved or disturbed. At least I didn't find J'onn's body, he reflected. That's something to be grateful for. But only a formidable adversary could have abducted J'onn, if that was indeed what had transpired; the Martian Manhunter's strength and powers rivaled Superman's own. Maybe Luthor's new Society? He speculated. Anger flared in Superman's heart at the thought of Lex striking out at his friends once more. This wouldn't be the first time that Luthor had organized an assault on the League...

For now, however, the trail had gone cold. Superman swooped down toward what remained of the Watchtower. I might as well check back in. Bruce will be waiting for my report.

"ATMOSPHERIC FORCE FIELD OPENING," an automated voice reported as he approached the perimeter of the sooty bubble. He quickly zipped through the momentary gap in the structure's emergency defenses. The rising flames posed no danger to him as he dove headfirst through the raging fire consuming the Hall of Justice. The League's famous Round Table lay in pieces about the demolished meeting-room. Shredded metal seats were scattered like fallen shrapnel. Windows made of clear Thanagarian crystal had been blown out by the blast.

"ATMOSPHERIC FORCE FIELD CLOSED. OPERATING AT SIX PERCENT."

That doesn't sound good, he thought.

He flew through a jagged breach in the floor to the chamber below. The Monitor Room was barely recognizable. Shattered screens offered no clue as to what had transpired here. Torn, sparking cables dangled from the ceiling. An overturned steel chair rested amidst a carpet of fallen debris. Earthlight filtered down from above, through

breached bulkheads. Scorched ceramic tiles were cracked and crumbling. The air smelled of smoke and burning circuitry. The artificial gravity felt distinctly weaker.

A solitary figure waited for him on an elevated walkway at the center of the ravaged nerve center. A stark black cloak and cowl were draped over the man's equally black body armor, so that he blended in with the shadows thrown by the faint blue light. Opaque white lenses concealed his eyes. The scalloped tips of his cape brushed against the floor. Only the bottom half of his face was left uncovered by his forbidding disguise. His mouth was a hard, straight line above a strong jaw.

"Well?" Batman asked.

Superman shook his head. "I've scanned the entire area. There's no physical trace of Martian Manhunter. J'onn is gone. And the Watchtower won't be standing for long either."

Batman nodded before turning back to his investigation. "The teleportation chamber was activated less than nine seconds before the tower exploded." His stern voice held even more of an edge than usual. "Someone was here. Someone did this."

Touching down lightly upon the floor, Superman noticed that Batman was holding a metal cube about the size of a disposable camera. Scorch marks blemished the object's carbon-steel casing. A blinking electronic light indicated that the device was still functioning to some degree. Superman tried to look past the casing, but his X-ray vision was blocked by a layer of lead shielding. "What's that?" he asked.

"A black box," Batman explained. "It's ghosted our security cameras and recorded everything on our monitor screens for the last two years. It should tell me who's responsible for this."

"More spying?" Superman frowned. They were still dealing with the genocidal machinations of Brother Eye. "That satellite of yours wasn't enough?"

If Batman was chastened by his colleague's rebuke, the

Dark Knight gave no sign of it. "Don't be naïve, Clark," he said. "This is simple security."

"Nothing's simple," a feminine voice intruded upon their discussion. They turned to see a breathtaking vision stride confidently out on the walkway. Earthlight, pouring down through the sundered walls and ceiling, fell upon a strikingly beautiful woman with lustrous black hair and a magnificent physique. A ruby-inlaid tiara rested above her smooth white brow. Silver bracelets adorned her well-toned arms. A golden breastplate and girdle gleamed upon her athletic figure. A star-spangled cape flowed behind her like a royal train. A lasso of golden links, glowing with their own enchanted radiance, rested upon one hip, a golden sword was sheathed against the other.

Standing nearly as tall as the two men, Wonder Woman could easily be mistaken for one of the fabled Greek goddesses who had granted her so many extraordinary abilities. I should have known she would join us, Superman realized. When the Watchtower exploded, an automatic distress signal had gone out to every active member of the League. Thankfully, a few of the backup teleporters were still working.

"You don't belong here, Diana," Batman said harshly.

"None of us do, Bruce," she replied. Her voice held a faintly exotic accent. "Not anymore."

Batman wasn't willing to concede the point. "People are scared."

"They should be," she answered. "The world is going to Tartarus."

That's not the point, Superman thought. "They're scared of us now. They're scared of us because of you." He wished that Diana wasn't forcing him to spell it out for her like this. "They've been broadcasting the images nonstop, Diana. Don't you understand?" His voice conveyed the horror he felt. "The whole world watched you. They all watched you murder a man."

His mind flashed back to that ghastly moment when, still dazed from Maxwell Lord's mind-control, he had looked

on helplessly as Wonder Woman snapped Max's neck with clear and deliberate intent. The awful crack that had heralded the man's death still echoed inside Superman's skull. Once more, he saw Max's lifeless body drop limply to the floor of the villain's command center, still wrapped tightly within the coils of Diana's golden lasso.

She did it for me, he acknowledged, to keep Max from turning me into a murderer. But in so doing, she violated the trust between us and the ordinary people we protect. The Justice League does not kill, especially not in cold blood. We stand for something that that.

Or we used to.

"We have spoken of this before," she said. "You both know what occurred. My lasso compelled Maxwell Lord to speak the truth. He had no intention of ever releasing you from his control. Under his command, you would have killed the rest of the League, and many other innocents besides. With the Lasso of Truth upon him, Max told me the only way I could truly free you." Her tone was somber, but unapologetic. "I made my decision. I stand by it as the proper one."

Superman wasn't sure what disturbed him more, her actions or her lack of remorse. He knew that Diana had slain monsters before, like Medousa or the Scylla, but Max Lord had not been some mythological Greek monstrosity; he had only been a man, albeit an evil one. He was one of the people we're supposed to protect.

A steel girder crashed somewhere below them. The walkway quaked beneath their feet. Obviously, the Watchtower wasn't done collapsing yet.

"It's not safe here," Superman observed.

Batman nodded in agreement. He clipped the black box to his utility belt. "I have what I came for." His cloak flapped behind him as he turned to leave. "I should get back to Gotham."

"And I to Themyscira," Wonder Woman said, referring to the island home of her Amazon sisters. Located deep within the Bermuda Triangle, the ageless sanctuary was per-

haps best known by the name the media had pinned on it: Paradise Island.

Superman was tempted to let the matter of Max's death drop, but knew that they could not ignore the repercussions of Diana's ruthless act. "So Themyscira will be harboring a fugitive?" That was no solution to their dilemma. "You have to answer for what you did."

"I will," she said. "When the time is right."

Superman was skeptical. "Is there ever going to be a right—" Despite the urgency of their discussion, an unexpected sound caught his attention. "Wait. Do you hear that?" He focused his superhearing on the noise. "It's a heartbeat."

J'onn? he wondered instantly, only a split second before a gigantic fist struck him with the force of a battering ram. The impact sent him rocketing upward through floor after floor and out into the thinning atmosphere within the force field. He smashed through the defensive barrier itself and kept on going.

"ATMOSPHERIC FORCE FIELD OPERATING AT FOUR PERCENT...."